



Title	Management of oral health problems by traditional Chinese medicine practitioners in Hong Kong
Other Contributor(s)	University of Hong Kong. Faculty of Dentistry.
Citation	
Issued Date	2002
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10722/49783
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Management of oral health problems by traditional Chinese medicine practitioners in Hong Kong

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1. ABSTRACT

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) lies deep-rooted within East and South-east Asia's cultural context and its usefulness in health care is gradually being accepted in the Western world. However, the application of TCM in the field of oral health care is still largely unexplored. The objectives of this study were to describe the theories and concepts of TCM involved in the treatment of oral health problems; to assess the frequency of patients with oral health complaints encountered by TCM practitioners in Hong Kong; and to report on the various approaches used by TCM practitioners for treating oral health problems.

In this study, a literature search was performed to obtain information regarding the general concepts of TCM. Interviews were conducted with TCM teaching staff in two universities to obtain 'expert views' on TCM and its application in managing five selected oral health problems. In addition, 101 TCM practitioners in Hong Kong were surveyed to find out their views on and treatments for oral health problems.

It was found that the basic principle of TCM is based upon maintaining an internal balance within the human body, and with the external environment. According to both the TCM experts and practitioners, oral health problems are due to an imbalance of Ying and Yang in the body. Intake of herbal and other forms of Chinese medicine, and modification of diet are the common treatment methods. The study results show that TCM practitioners in Hong Kong did not encounter patients with oral lesions frequently. Furthermore, referral of patients with oral health problems to dentists for treatment was an uncommon practice among the TCM practitioners surveyed. The dental professionals and TCM practitioners in Hong Kong should increase their level of mutual understanding and collaboration in the provision of health care services.

2. INTRODUCTION

Traditional Chinese medicine is an interesting and fascinating subject to the health professionals trained in western medicine. Its various methods of treating disease have passed on from one generation to the next and have stood the test of time. The concept of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) is based on maintaining harmony and internal balance within the human body. Whether this can improve health and cure diseases remains to a certain extent unanswered. Western medical ideology, however, would tend to view this approach as empirical and lacking scientific explanation.

Hong Kong is a unique place in the world where the East and the West meet. Although health care in the form of modern western medicine is easily accessible in Hong Kong, yet many local people use TCM when they have health problems. In this aspect, oral health problems are not exceptions [1].

The practice of TCM has remained unregulated in Hong Kong till 1999 when the Chinese Medical Council of Hong Kong was established. The main purposes of setting up of this Council are to protect the health of the public and their consumers' rights, to ensure the professional standard of Chinese medical practice and the trade of Chinese medicines through "self-regulation" [2]. The process of registering TCM practitioners in Hong Kong has been put into action and in early 2002 a list of TCM practitioners was produced.

In a previous community health project conducted by dental students, lay perspectives on TCM and its usage by adults in Hong Kong for recurrent aphthous ulcers was studied [3]. It was found that the consumption of herbal medicine and the use of over-the-counter Chinese medicine drugs were common among people with aphthous ulcers. So far, no study has been

conducted on the management of oral health problems by TCM practitioners in Hong Kong. Hence the purpose of this exploratory investigation was to gain an insight into the management of oral health problems by traditional Chinese medical practitioners in Hong Kong.

3. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This study had two broad aims. These were:

1. To investigate the general concepts of traditional Chinese medicine and its application in treating oral health problems.
2. To investigate how oral health problem were managed by traditional Chinese medicine practitioners in Hong Kong.

The specific objectives of this study were:

1. to describe the theories and concepts of traditional Chinese medicine involved in the treatment of oral health problems;
2. to assess the frequency of patients with oral health problems encountered by traditional Chinese medicine practitioners in Hong Kong; and
3. to report on the various approaches used by traditional Chinese medicine practitioners in treating oral health problems.

4. MATERIALS AND METHODS

To achieve our study objectives, three main activities were carried out. These were literature search, interviewing TCM experts, and survey of TCM practitioners in Hong Kong.

4.1. Literature search

The first part of our study involved a literature search on the concepts of traditional Chinese medicine. Books and journal articles in the Dental Library of the University of Hong Kong were retrieved and read by all members of our dental student group. Published material in other sources was also retrieved when possible. The vast amount of information found was then summarized and presented in this report.

4.2. Interview with traditional Chinese medicine experts

In an attempt to find a TCM expert from whom we could obtain information on TCM and its application in treating oral health problems, three universities in Hong Kong that offer degree course in traditional Chinese medicine were contacted. These were the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Baptist University, and the School of Professional and Continuing Education (SPACE) of the University of Hong Kong.

We were successful with the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong but the Hong Kong Baptist University declined to offer us a resource person. Hence only two interviews with a TCM expert were conducted, one in each of the two universities that agreed to participate in this study.

These interviews were conducted using a specially designed questionnaire. A list of questions covering various aspects, from concepts of traditional Chinese medicine to treatment approaches used in managing patients with oral health problems, was prepared for the interviews (Appendix 1). This was supplemented with selected colour clinical photographs pertaining to the oral conditions included in the questionnaire. Notes were written during the interviews and the interviews were also recorded on tape.

4.3. Survey of TCM practitioners

The target population of this survey was traditional Chinese medicine practitioners in Hong Kong who were specialized in herbal medicine. Although a list of TCM practitioners was available in the website of the Chinese Medical Council of Hong Kong, no address nor telephone number was provided. Thus, we had to look for the TCM practitioners' clinic by walking through streets in various districts of Hong Kong. Once a TCM clinic was found, a member of our dental student group would go into the clinic and request for a short interview with the TCM practitioner. The interviews were conducted in Chinese using a structured questionnaire (Appendix 2). The questions ranged from theories and concepts of traditional Chinese medicine to management of patients with five selected oral health problems. This was supplemented with colour clinical photographs showing specific oral conditions mentioned in the questions. Each interview lasted between five and fifteen minutes. The questionnaire had been pilot tested on 14 TCM practitioners and modified afterwards before its final adoption for use in the survey.

The districts covered in this survey were:

- Hong Kong Island – Aberdeen, Western District, Sai Ying Pun, Sheung Wan, Central, Wanchai, Causeway Bay, North Point, Quarry Bay, Shaukeiwan and Sai Wan Ho
- Kowloon – Kowloon City, Yaumatei, Mei Foo and Hung Hom
- New Territories – Tuen Mun, Tsing Yi, Tsuen Wan and Kwai Chung

Six members of our dental student group conducted these interviews. Hong Kong Island was covered by three members, Kowloon by one and the New Territories by two members of our group.

The information collected in the questionnaires was first coded and then entered into a personal computer using the software Microsoft Excel. It was analyzed with the software SPSS for Windows to produce the descriptive statistics.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Basic theories of Traditional Chinese Medicine

Traditional Chinese Medicine 傳統中醫藥 (TCM) is different from conventional Western Medicine. It is based on a number of conceptual theories. The following is just a brief summary of the main theories. Readers who are interested in knowing more are advised to read up the material in the further readings listed at the end of this report.

5.1.1. The Yin and Yang theory 陰陽學說

Yin 陰 and Yang 陽 are opposite to each other. Yin refers to cold, inwardness, darkness, responsiveness and femininity while Yang refers to hot, outwardness, light, active and masculinity. In a healthy body, Yin and Yang lie in equilibrium and any disturbance of this delicate balance will cause health problems, including oral health problems.

5.1.2. The Theory of Five Elements 五行學說

Wood 木, Fire 火, Earth 土, Metal 金 and Water 水 are the five basic elements of nature. They are in a balanced state where they control and promote each other in order to regulate growth and development of the body including the Zang Fu organs and the Channels. The Large Intestine Channel of Hand-Yangming 手陽明大腸經 and the Stomach Channel of Foot-Yangming 足陽明胃經 are responsible for the health of the oral cavity and they belong to the Earth element. Disturbances to the balance of the Earth element will cause oral diseases.

5.1.3. The five Zang organs, six Fu organs and Channels 五臟六腑與經絡

The functions of the Zang Fu organs and the Channels are to maintain normal metabolism and flow of Qi (air) 氣, Blood 血 and Jin Ye (body fluid) 津液.

The five Zang organs 五臟 are the Heart 心, Liver 肝, Spleen 脾, Lung 肺 and Kidney 腎. Organs that related to oral region are:

- the heart which is related to the tongue,
- the spleen which is related to the oral cavity, and
- the kidney which is related to the development and health of the teeth and gingivae.

The six Fu organs 六腑 are the Gallbladder 膽, Stomach 胃, Small intestine 小腸, Large intestine 大腸, Urinary bladder 膀胱 and the Sanjiao 三焦. They take part in the metabolism of Qi, Blood and Jin Ye. In TCM, the oral cavity is the door of the Fu organs because food enters the oral cavity and is finally metabolized in the Fu organs. Diseases of the Fu organs will result in diseases in the oral region, e.g. fire-evil in the stomach will cause toothache.

The Channels 經絡 are the passages through which Qi 氣 and Blood 血 flow. Imbalance of Qi and Blood in the following channels will give rise to oral diseases:

- Large Intestine Channel of Hand-Yangming 手陽明大腸經
- Small Intestine Channel of Hand-Taiyang 手太陽小腸經
- Sanjiao Channel of Hand-Shaoyang 手少陽三焦經
- Stomach Channel of Foot-Yangming 足陽明胃經
- Spleen Channel of Foot-Taiyin 足太陰脾經
- Kidney Channel of Foot-Shaoyin 足少陰腎經
- Liver Channel of Foot-Jueyin 足厥陰肝經

5.1.4. Qi (Air) 氣, Blood 血 and Jin Ye (Body fluid) 津液

Qi 氣 is an essential conceptual substance of the body which ensures its proper functions and health. There are 4 types of Qi: Yuan Qi (Primary Qi) 元氣, Zong Qi (Pectoral Qi) 宗氣, Ying Qi (Nutrient Qi) 營氣 and Wei Qi (Defensive Qi) 衛氣.

Blood 血 is a red fluid that circulates within the body, providing nourishment to the various organs.

Jin Ye 津液 refers to the fluid that functions to moisten the body. Body fluids such as saliva, sweat, tears and gastric juice are all examples of Jin Ye.

Disturbance to the circulation of Qi, Blood and Jin Ye will cause oral diseases, e.g. insufficient Qi and blood flow to the periodontal tissues will cause periodontal diseases.

5.2. Explanation of diseases according to traditional Chinese medicine

Diseases can be classified into eight types by the Eight Principles 八綱 : Yin 陰, Yang 陽, Exterior 表, Interior 裡, Cold 寒, Heat 熱, Asthenia (Deficiency) 虛, and Sthenia (Excess) 實.

5.2.1. Yin and Yang 陰陽

Yin and Yang are used to generalize the categories of diseases. Exterior, Heat and Sthenia belong to Yang while Interior, Cold and Asthenia belong to Yin. For example,

deficiency of Yin will activate the fire-evil in the stomach and cause oral diseases.

5.2.2. Exterior and Interior 表裡

Exterior and Interior are used to describe the ‘depth’ of diseases in the body and their direction of development.

- Exterior Syndrome is caused by six evils 六淫 (Wind 風, Fire 火, Wetness 濕, Dryness 燥, Heat 熱 and Cold 寒). For example, one of the 4 evils of fire, wetness, dryness and cold may join together with the wind evil to attack the channels related to the oral cavity through the nose and mouth to cause toothache and periodontal diseases.
- Interior Syndrome is caused by Zang Fu organs, Qi, and blood imbalances in the deeper part of the body. For example, fire evil in the heart and stomach, and wetness and heat evils in the stomach and spleen can cause oral ulcers and periodontal diseases through the various channels.

5.2.3. Cold and Heat 寒熱

Cold and Heat are used to differentiate the nature of diseases which is caused by cold and heat evils.

5.2.4. Asthenia and Sthenia 虛實

Asthenia and Sthenia are used to categorize and distinguish the relative strength of the Yuan Qi and the pathogenic factors.

- Asthenic Syndrome refers to diseases caused by deterioration of organ function due to insufficient vital Qi, Blood, Yang and body fluid. This is treated by the tonifying 補

method. For example, toothache can be caused by asthenic fire.

- Sthenic Syndrome refers to diseases caused by invasion of pathogenic factors which may lead to obstruction the body's function. It is treated by clearing away the pathogenic factors. For example, toothache and periodontal diseases can be caused Wind-fire.

5.2.5. Mechanisms of diseases

In TCM, there are four main disease mechanisms. These are imbalance of Qi and Blood, invasion of pathogenic factors or weak immune system, imbalance of Yin and Yang, and dysfunction of the Zang-Fu organs and the Channels.

Pathogenic factors are divided into two types according to their origin, namely, exopathic infection 外感 and internal injury 內傷. Exopathic infection refers to a disease that is caused by the six evils. Internal injuries are diseases caused by disturbances in Qi and Blood.

5.2.6. Diagnosis and management

Four diagnostic methods are used in traditional Chinese medicine. These are inspection 望, listening or smelling 聞, inquiry 問, and pulse taking 切.

The treatment or management approach to be adopted depends on the causes of the disease, signs and symptoms, nature of the disease according to the eight principles, acute or chronic, seasonal changes, geographical location, patient's background and body conditions. Herbal medicine, topical drugs and acupuncture are the common methods used in treating diseases or promoting health in traditional Chinese medicine.

5.3. Interview with traditional Chinese medicine experts

Two experienced teachers of TCM university degree course, one each from the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, were interviewed. The following was a summary of the information collected in the interviews.

TCM practitioners make diagnosis according to the holistic status of patients, such as patient's gender, age, character, nature of body, and diet. Abnormal signs and symptoms are reflections of the pathological changes within the body and these changes are the responses of the body to pathogenic factors. TCM, unlike Western Medicine, focuses more on the process of the pathological changes in the body that disturb the balance of Yin and Yang, rather than on any specific disease agent.

The main principles of treatment used in TCM are to dispel the pathogenic factors and to restore body harmony. Management of disease is according to patient's status, signs and symptoms, and cause and nature of disease. Different diseases can be treated with a similar approach while a disease can be treated by different approaches. This is called 辨症論治 and is quite different from the treatment approach adopted in Western Medicine, which is more specific (針對性治療). Although there is a difference between TCM and Western Medicine, it is becoming more common to treat health problems by combining the approaches of TCM and Western Medicine.

The following explanations and proposed treatments for five selected oral health problems were given by the TCM experts interviewed.

5.3.1. Toothache

According to traditional Chinese medicine theory, teeth are related to the kidney channel and gingivae is related to the stomach channel. Toothache can be classified into two main categories, sthenia 實 and asthenia 虛.

5.3.1.1. Sthenia category 實

Toothache in this category can be further subdivided into wind-fire toothache (風火牙痛) and stomach-fire toothache (胃火牙痛).

The signs and symptoms of wind-fire toothache (風火牙痛) include having an intermitted pain that is relieved by taking cold food, but stimulated by hot. It is due to the attack of fire evil stagnated in the stomach channel of yangming on the gingivae. It is manifested as redness, swelling and pain of the gingivae. Sometimes this may be accompanied by fever. The treatment approach is by herbal medicine to clear the wind-fire evil, to detoxify and to relieve the swelling (疏散風火,解毒消腫).

The signs and symptoms of stomach-fire toothache (胃火牙痛) include having a severe pain, halitosis and bleeding gums, and a strong and rapid pulse. In a severe case, the patient may have facial swelling. It is due to excessive intake of spicy and deep-fried food which in turn cause an increase in stomach-fire (胃火). The excessive amount of fire evil attacks the stomach channel and causes extravasation of blood (熱迫血行), leading to gum bleeding. The treatment approach is by herbal medicine to clear away the stomach-fire, to stop the bleeding and to relieve the pain (清胃瀉火,止血止痛).

5.3.1.2. Asthenia category 虛

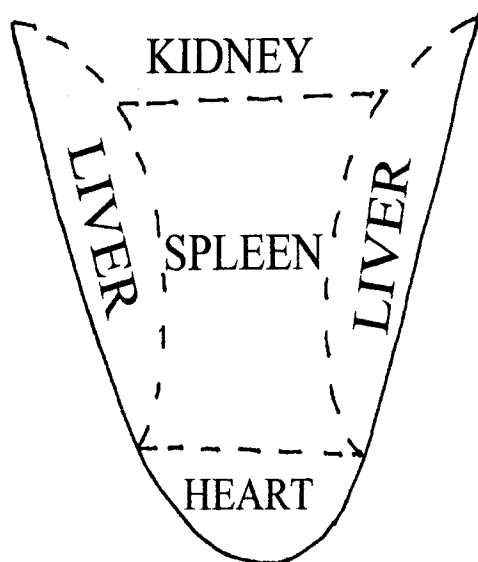
The signs and symptoms of asthenic-fire toothache (虛火牙痛) include mild pain and slightly swollen gingivae. If these symptoms persist for a long period of time, it may lead to gum recession and mobile teeth. This type of toothache is more common among the elderly. The pain usually gets more severe in the afternoon. This kind of toothache is caused by yin deficiency (陰虛) in the stomach and the kidney channel, which leads to hyperactivity of asthenic fire. The treatment approach is by herbal medicine or the use of the Chinese drug 滋陰八味丸 to nourish yin in order to diminish the fire evil (滋陰降火).

The signs and symptoms of toothache caused by caries (齲齒牙痛) are similar to those of stomach-fire toothache (胃火牙痛). This type of toothache is also called wind-worm toothache (風虫牙痛). The treatment approach is by herbal medicine to clear the stomach fires, to activate the circulation of qi and blood, and to stop bleeding (清胃瀉火, 行氣止血). Application of the Chinese topical medicine 細辛 (Herbal Asari) into the caries lesion can kill the 'tooth-worm' and have an analgesic effect (殺虫止痛).

5.3.2. Gum diseases

The signs and symptoms of gum diseases include localized redness and swelling, pain of the gingivae, and pus formation. Gingival swelling may sometime be present as 牙癰, which is an alveolar abscess caused by the attack of fire evil in the stomach channel. The treatment approach is by herbal medicine to clear away the excessive heat and for detoxification (清熱解毒). If there is pus, it should be drained away to reduce swelling.

5.3.3. White patches on the tongue



Location of lesions on the tongue are related to the Zang organs (五臟) as depicted above. Therefore, white patches occurring on a part of the tongue may reflect some underlying problems of the related organ. For example, if white patches occur on the middle part of the tongue, there may be wetness-heat evil stagnated in the spleen-stomach channel (脾胃濕熱). Thus, there are various treatments for white patches on the tongue which are according to the underlying problems.

5.3.4. White patches on oral mucosa

White lesions on the oral mucosa, e.g. buccal mucosa, include erosion of oral mucosa presenting as many white spots or as patches. This is known as 口糜. Adult patients may also have halitosis. Most of the white lesions found in children are 鵝口瘡. Erosion of mucous membrane of oral cavity is caused by retention of wetness-heat evil in the spleen-stomach channel (脾胃濕熱). The treatment approach is by herbal medicine to clear away the wetness-heat evil (清熱去濕).

5.3.5. Oral ulcers

The oral mucosa is related to the spleen channel and there are also two main types of oral ulcers, asthenia 虛 and sthenia 實.

5.3.5.1. Sthenia type 實

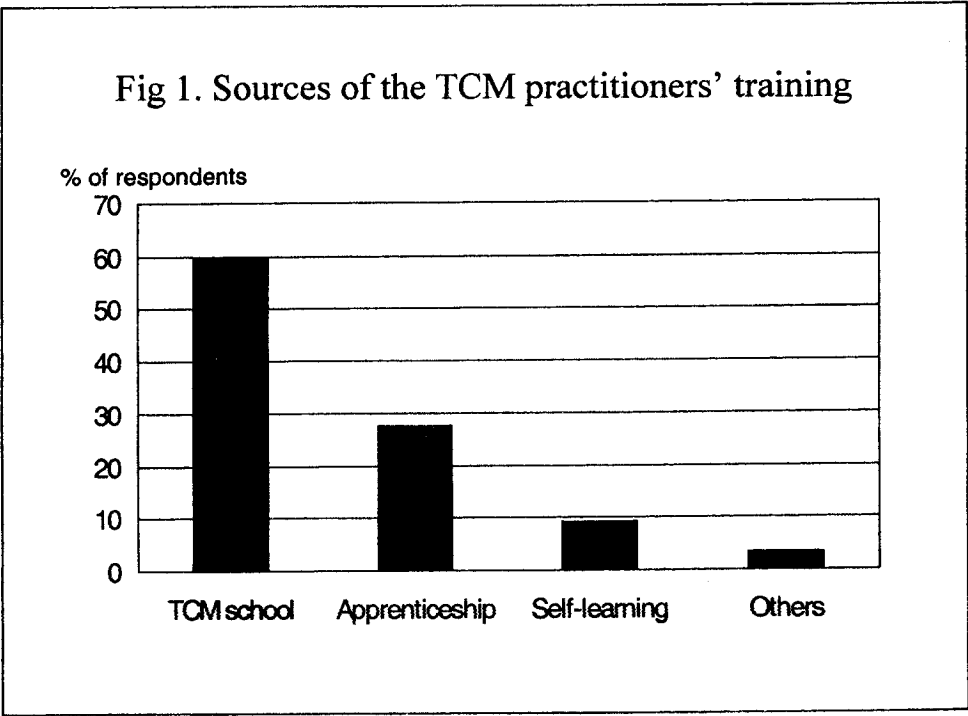
The signs and symptoms of this type of oral ulcers include multiple lesions, with large and deep ulcers and considerable redness of the surrounding tissues. It is more painful and more noticeable than the asthenic type ulcers. The underlying causes are similar to those of stomach-fire toothache, which is due to excessive intake of deep-fired food leading to retention of heat evil in the stomach and spleen channel (脾胃積熱). The treatment approach is by herbal medicine to clear away the excessive heat and for detoxification (清熱解毒).

5.3.5.2. Asthenia type 虛

These oral ulcers are smaller and shallower. Two to three ulcers may be present at the same time. The surrounding mucosa is slightly erythematous. Recurrent attack is common and they are less painful than the sthenic type ulcers. The underlying cause is yin deficiency in the stomach channel leading to an increase in asthenic fire. The Chinese drug 滋陰八味丸 which enriches yin and diminishes fire (滋陰降火) would be an effective treatment.

5.4. Survey of TCM practitioners

In this survey, a total 127 TCM practitioners were approached. Among them, 26 turned down our request for an interview. As a result, only 101 practitioners were successfully interviewed, giving a response rate of 79.5%.



Most of the TCM practitioners surveyed (60%) received their training in a post-secondary institution, i.e. a TCM school or a university (Fig. 1). The next common source of training was by apprenticeship, i.e. following TCM masters. Self-learning and other means each only accounted for a few percent of the answers.

Fig 2. Clinical experience of the TCM practitioners

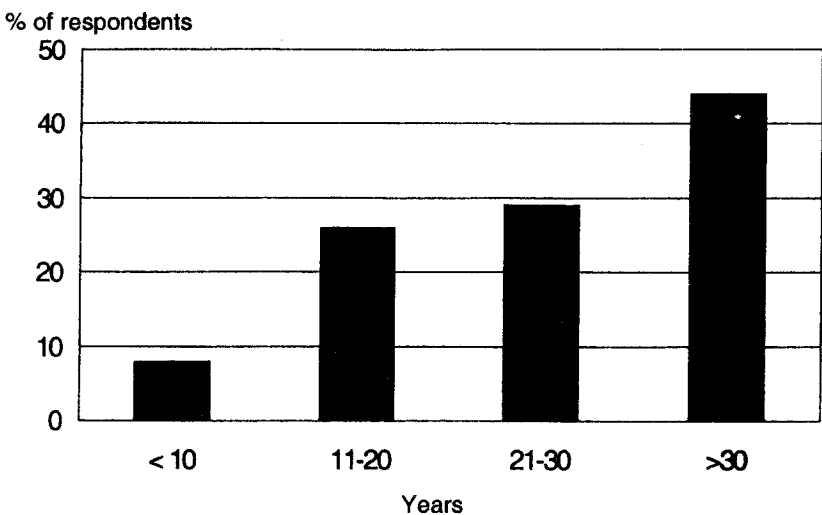
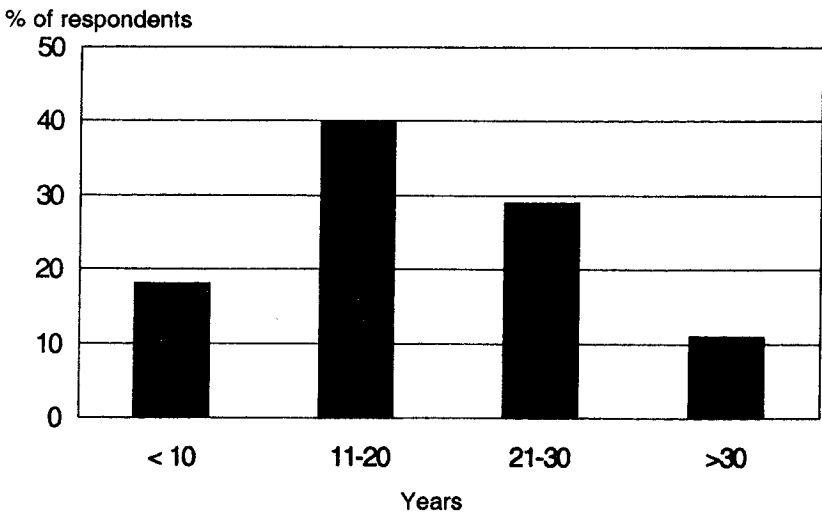
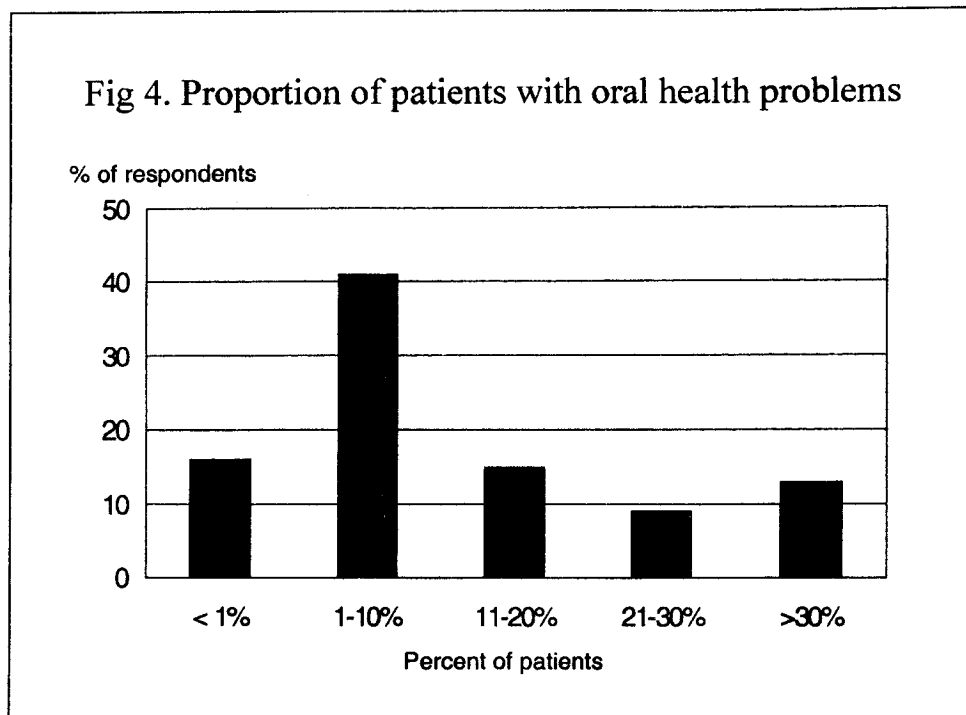


Fig 3. Duration of TCM practice in Hong Kong



Close to half (44%) of the respondents had more than 30 years of clinical experience in TCM (Fig. 2). Most of the other respondents had between 11 to 20 years of experience. Two-fifths of the respondent had practised in Hong Kong for 11-20 years while close to one-third had practised for 21-30 years (Fig. 3).



In general, the survey respondents did not come across patients with oral health problems very often (Fig. 4). For most of TCM practitioners surveyed (57%), no more than 10% of their patients had oral health problems. Only about one-fifth of the respondents reported that more than 20% of their patients in the TCM clinic had oral health problems.

In the face-to-face interviews, the TCM practitioners were asked to give their explanations to five selected oral health problems and also to indicate their treatment approach. The five problems were:

- toothache
- gum diseases (swollen gums, gum bleeding, recession and tooth mobility)
- white patches on the tongue
- white patches on the oral mucosa
- oral ulcers

Fig. 5 Explanations given for toothache

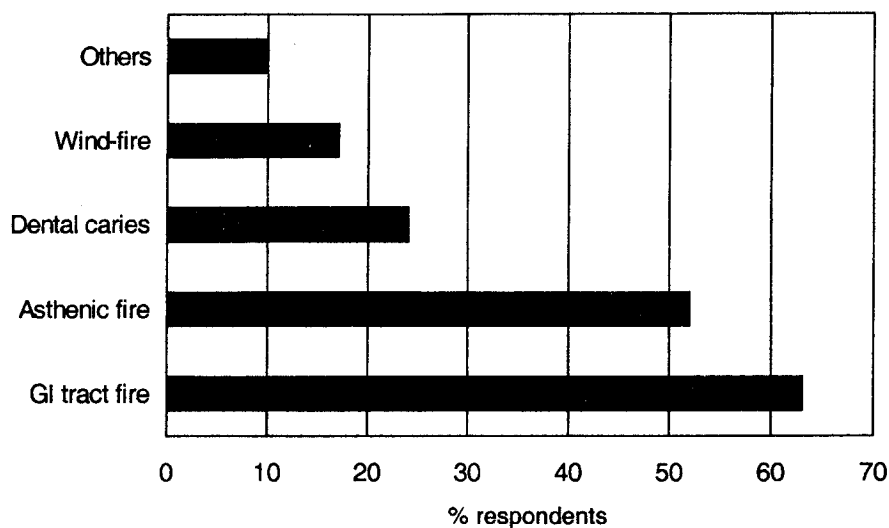
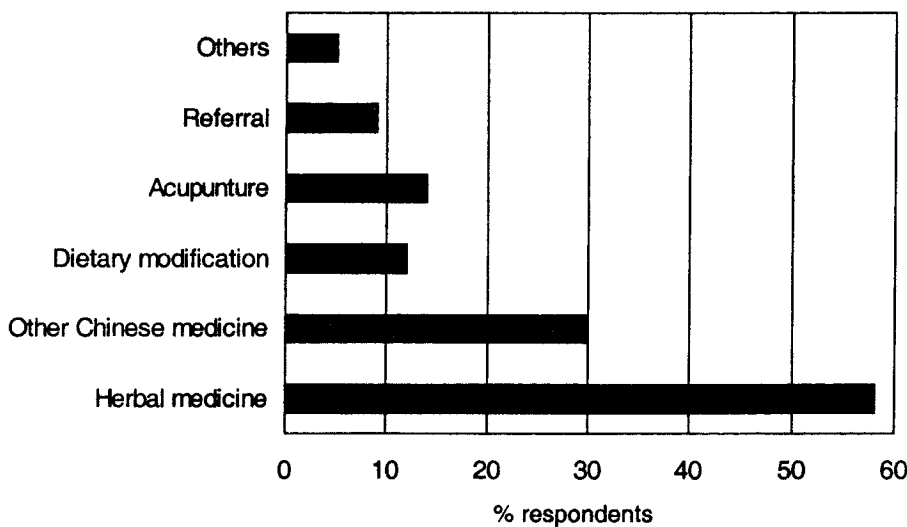


Fig. 6 Treatment for toothache



The two most common explanations given by the respondents for toothache were GI tract fire and asthenic fire, 63% and 52% respectively (Fig. 5). The majority of the respondents would treat toothache with herbs or other Chinese medicine, e.g. over-the-counter drugs (Fig. 6). The use of acupuncture was not common, only by 14% of the respondents.

Fig. 7 Explanations given for gum diseases

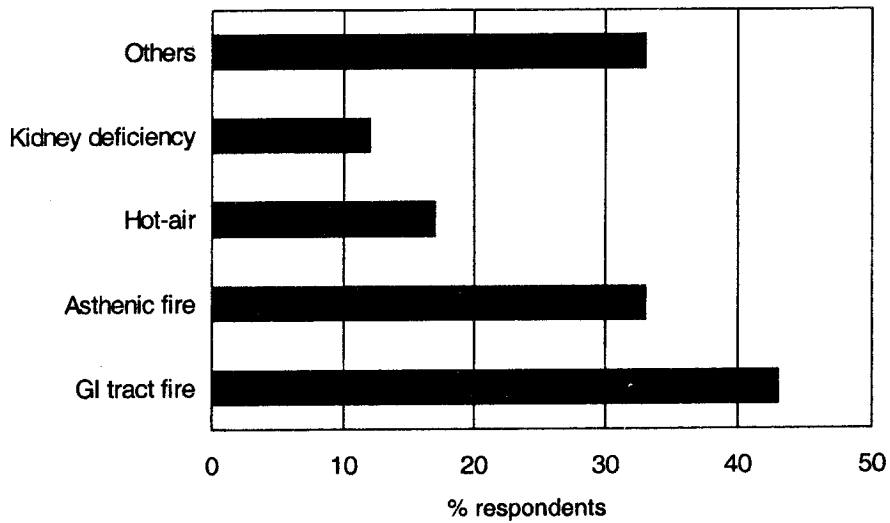
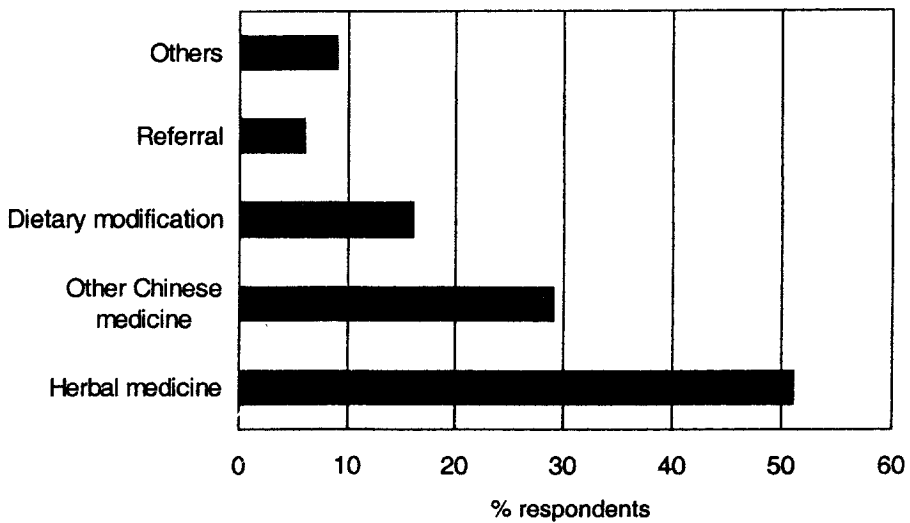


Fig. 8 Treatment for gum diseases



It can be seen in Fig. 7 that excessive yang over yin was the most common explanation given for gum diseases as most of the respondents mentioned GI tract fire (43%), asthenic fire (33%), and/or hot-air (17%). Treatment with herbal medicine was the most common (51%) and this was followed by the use of other Chinese medicine and dietary modification (Fig. 8).

Fig. 9 Explanations given for white patches on tongue

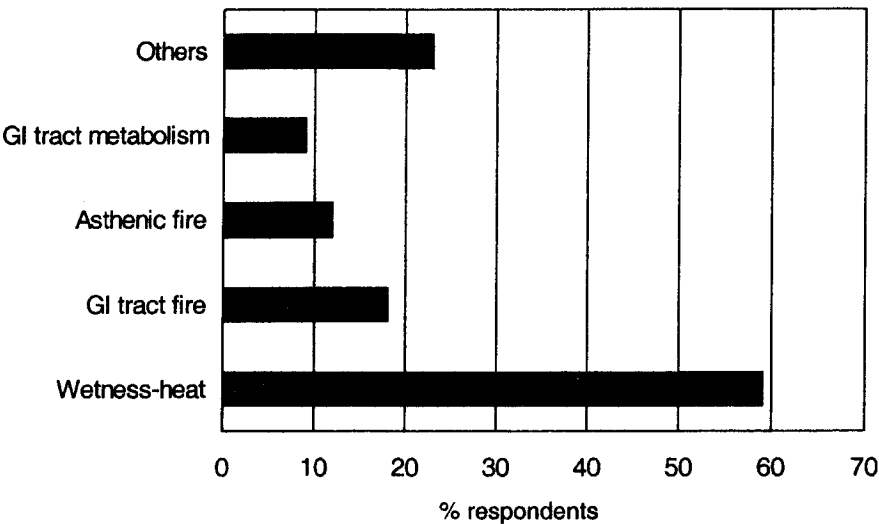
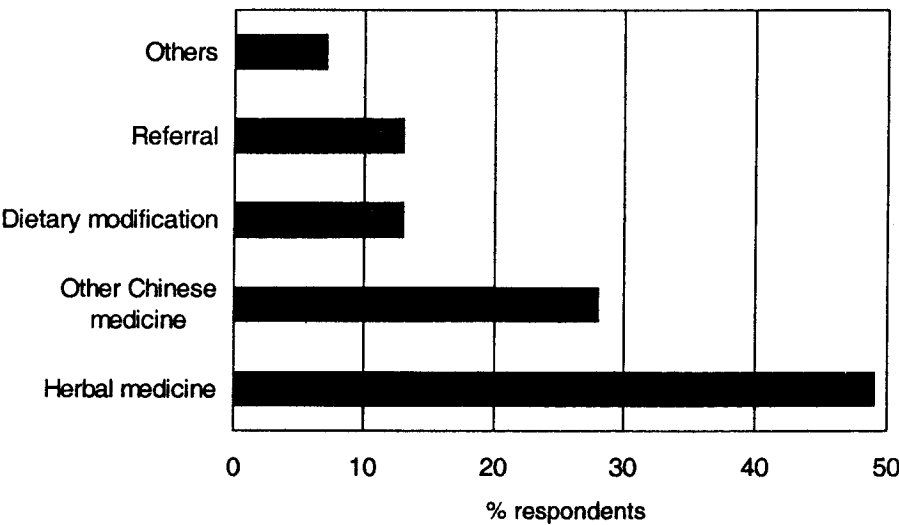


Fig. 10 Treatment for white patches on tongue



Wetness-heat was the most common explanation (59%) given by the respondents for white patches on the tongue (Fig. 9). As for the proposal treatment, the use of herbal medicine was the most common (49%) and this was followed by the use of other Chinese medicine (28%) and dietary modification (Fig. 10).

Fig. 11 Explanations given for white patches on mucosa

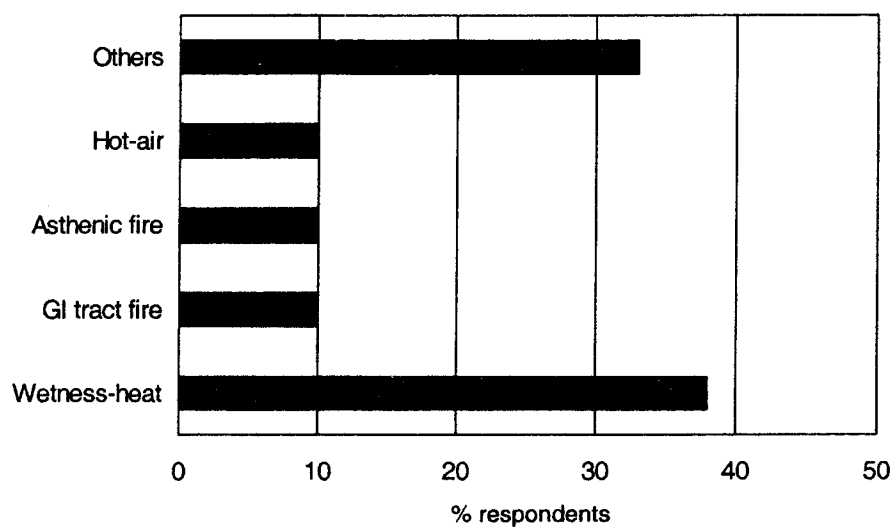
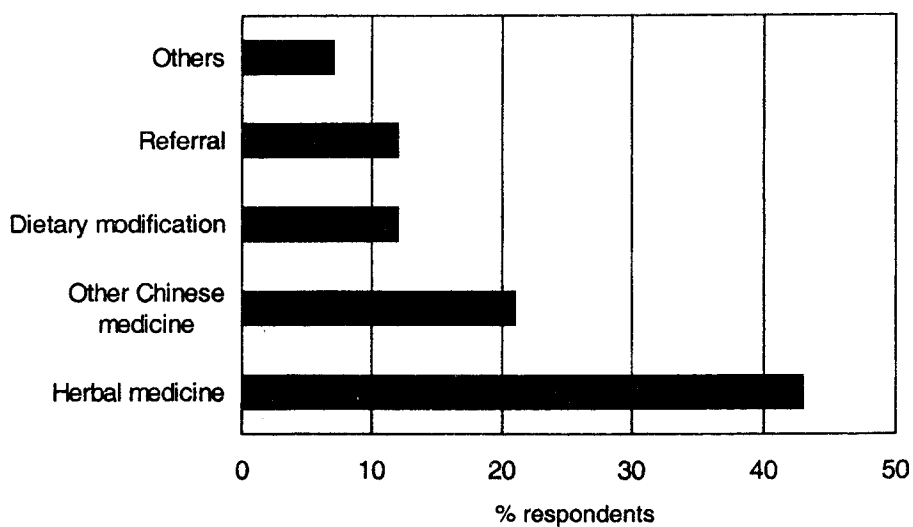


Fig. 12 Treatment for white patches on oral mucosa



Similar to white patches on the tongue, wetness-heat was again the most common explanation (38%) given by the respondents for white patches on the oral mucosa (Fig. 11). As shown in Fig. 12, the two most commonly proposed treatments were the use of herbal medicine (43%) and other Chinese medicine (21%).

Fig. 13 Explanations given for oral ulcers

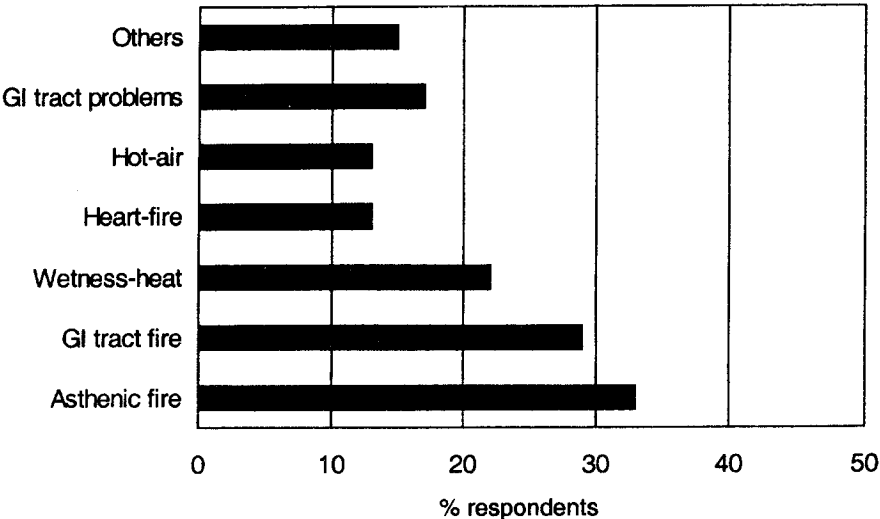
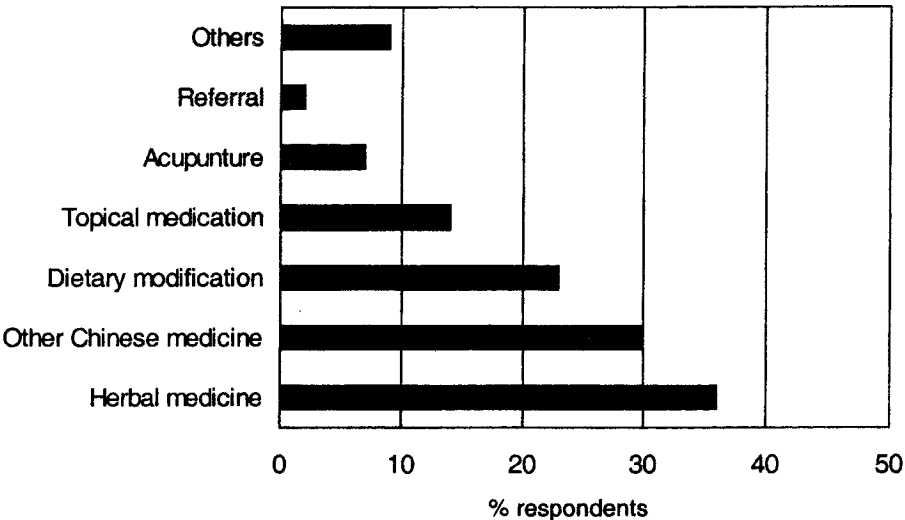


Fig. 14 Treatment for oral ulcers



A number of explanations, such as asthenic fire (33%), GI tract fire (29%) and wetness-heat (22%) were given by the respondents for oral ulcers (Fig. 13). Besides the use of herbal (36%) and other forms of Chinese medicine (30%), dietary modification (23%) was also a commonly suggested treatment for oral ulcers (Fig. 14).

6. DISCUSSIONS

From the information we gathered in the literature search and from the TCM experts, it is apparent that the core principle of traditional Chinese medicine is based on maintaining a state of harmony between Yin and Yang, between different organs and between the body and the environment. Any disharmonies or pathological changes in the system will manifest on the body as various signs and symptoms. Thus, the treatment approaches adopted by TCM practitioners aim to dispel the pathogenic factors and to restore the balance between the different systems in the body. This is very different from the treatment approach adopted in Western Medicine, which is much more disease specific and often emphasizes on treating the local lesion. This is illustrated by the findings from the interviews with TCM experts and the survey of TCM practitioners in this study. It was found that the intake of herbal and other forms of Chinese medicine and modification of diet were the commonly prescribed treatment for the five selected oral health problems. These treatments exert their effect on the problems through a systemic pathway. On the contrary, acupuncture and topical medicine were not commonly prescribed by the TCM practitioners. The former treatment was prescribed for the management of toothache while the latter was for the management of oral ulcers by around 10% of the respondents only.

It was found in our survey that the TCM practitioners in Hong Kong had a very diverse training background, with only around 60% of the respondents having been trained in different TCM schools. This is not surprising because formal training in traditional Chinese Medicine was not available in the universities in Hong Kong until a few years ago. Despite the establishment of the Chinese Medical Council of Hong Kong in 1999, there has not been any examination or professional assessment of the TCM practitioners. Thus, there is no quality assurance system for maintaining a minimum professional standard of the TCM

practitioners. This variation in standard is shown in the variations in the explanations and treatment approaches given by the TCM practitioners surveyed in this study, and in the discrepancy between the opinions of the TCM experts teaching in the universities and those of the TCM practitioners surveyed. For example, regarding the cause of toothache, the majority of TCM practitioners' answers were asthenia fire and G.I. tract fire. However, according to the opinions of the TCM experts, asthenia fire is only one of the many reasons. Toothache can also be due to sthenia, which can be further subdivided into wind-fire toothache and stomach-fire toothache.

In this study, most of the TCM practitioners surveyed were reluctant to tell us the number of patients they seen in a week. Despite this, most of them informed us that patients seeking treatment because of oral health problems only comprised a small proportion of their patients, usually below 10%. In our literature search, it was also noticed that oral health problems were not major topics in traditional Chinese medicine.

The low utilization of TCM practitioners by the people in Hong Kong for treating oral health problems may be due to their low level of perceived oral health problems [4] or that they would like to consult other health professionals such as a dentist, or have self-care measures. Another finding of this study which may be of some dental public health significance is about the practice of TCM practitioners in referring patients with oral health problems to other health professionals for further or joint care. It was found that only a few percent of the TCM practitioners surveyed would refer their patient with the five selected oral health problems to a dentist. They tended to regard the oral health problem as a manifestation of a disharmony of the body's system which they could treat. This behaviour has reported in a previous dental student project [5] in which it was described as undesirable, since a delay in seeking dental treatment may lead to complications.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Traditional Chinese medicine has its own complex system of theories to explain health and diseases, and its own treatment methods. Two of the most important ones are the theories of 'Yin and Yang' and the 'Five Elements' (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water). These also apply in the explanation and treatment of oral health problems.

In treating oral health problems, unlike Western medicine practitioners, TCM practitioners do not focus on the use of local treatment. Instead, they aim at adjusting the internal balance of 'yin and yang' and the 'five elements' in the patient's body as a whole. Intake of herbal and other forms of Chinese medicine, and modification of diet are the common methods for treating oral health problems.

Results of our survey on TCM practitioners in Hong Kong show that they did not come across patients with oral health problems frequently. Furthermore, referral of patients with oral health problems to dentists for treatment was an uncommon practice among the TCM practitioners surveyed.

It is recommended that more investigations on the effectiveness of TCM treatment of oral health problems be carried out. Moreover, the dental professionals and TCM practitioners in Hong Kong should increase their level of mutual understanding and collaboration in the provision of health care services. There should be more communications between the two professions which will probably result in a better service to and a more efficient management of patients with oral health problems.

8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to our teacher advisors, Dr. Kevin Ng and Dr. Edward Lo, for their guidance and help throughout this project.

We would like to thank the TCM experts and the TCM practitioners who participated in the interviews in this study. Without their cooperation and support, this study could not have been implemented.

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Oral Health Management of Traditional Chinese Medicine
Practitioners in Hong Kong

Interview Questionnaire for Experts in Traditional Chinese Medicine / University
Teaching Staff

1. How would, in your expert opinion explain the following oral conditions on the basis of traditional Chinese medicine ?

A. Toothache –

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B. Gum Disease –

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C. White patches on the tongue –

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D. White patches in the remainder of the oral mucosa (Eg. Buccal mucosal) –

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E. Oral ulceration –

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2. What is your treatment approach for the above mentioned conditions ?

A. Toothache –

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A. Gum Disease –

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B. White patches on the tongue –

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C. White patches in the remainder of the oral mucosa (Eg. Buccal mucosal) –

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D. Oral ulceration –

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3. Texts on Chinese medicine you would recommend for reference ?

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香港大學牙科學院 (4.1組)
口腔衛生推廣計劃
香港傳統中醫師診療口腔的方法

《與中醫師的訪問》

- 1) 請問閣下從哪裡學習中醫？
☐ 大學 / 中醫學院
☐ 師承
☐ 自修
☐ 其他:
- 2) 請問閣下有多少年臨床經驗？
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- 3) 請問閣下在香港執業有多少年？
.....
- 4) 請問閣下平均每星期看多少病人？
當中有多少個是因口腔疾病而求診？
- 5) 請以傳統中醫學理論來解釋以下情況：
牙痛，牙齒敏感
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牙周病 (如：牙肉腫脹，牙肉出血，牙肉收縮，牙齒鬆動)
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舌頭上的白斑

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口腔粘膜上的白斑

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口腔潰瘍 (飛滋，損傷性口腔潰瘍)

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- 6) 請問閣下以哪一種方法來治療以下口腔疾病：(如：藥草、食療、藥物等等)

牙痛，牙齒敏感

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牙周病 (如：牙肉腫脹，牙肉出血，牙肉收縮，牙齒鬆動)

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舌頭上的白斑

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口腔粘膜上的白斑

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口腔潰瘍 (飛滋，損傷性口腔潰瘍)

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